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THE SISTERS

BY AMY LOWELL

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot,
We women who write poetry. And when you think
How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
With matrices in body and in brain?
I rather think that there is just the reason
We are so sparse a kind of human-being;
The strength of forty thousand Atlases
Is needed for our every-day concerns.
There's Sappho, now I wonder what was Sappho.
I know a single, slender thing about her:
That, loving, she was like a burning birch-tree
All tall and glittering fire, and that she wrote
Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,
A frozen blaze before it broke and fell.
Ah, me! I wish I could have talked to Sappho,
Surprised her reticences by flinging mine
Into the wind. This tossing off of garments
Which cloud the soul is none too easy doing
With us to-day. But still I think with Sappho
One might accomplish it were she in the mood
To bare her loveliness of words and tell
The reasons, as she possibly conceived them,
Of why they are so lovely. Just to know
How she came at them, just to watch
The crisp sea sunshine playing on her hair
And listen, thinking all the while 'twas she
Who spoke and that we two were sisters
Of a strange, isolated little family.
And she is Sappho—Sappho—not Miss or Mrs.,
A leaping fire we call so for convenience,
But Mrs. Browning—who would ever think
Of such presumption as to call her "Ba?"

Which draws the perfect line between sea-cliffs
 And a close-shuttered room in Wimpole Street.
 Sappho could fly her impulses like bright
 Balloons tip-tilting to a morning air
 And write about it. Mrs. Browning's heart
 Was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay
 Stretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek
 And speculating, as I must suppose,
 In just this way on Sappho; all the need,
 The huge, imperious need of loving, crushed
 Within the body she believed so sick.
 And it was sick, poor lady, because words
 Are merely simulacra after deeds
 Have wrought a pattern; when they take the place
 Of actions they breed a poisonous miasma
 Which, though it leave the brain, eats up the body.
 So Mrs. Browning, aloof and delicate,
 Lay still upon her sofa, all her strength
 Going to uphold her over-topping brain.
 It seems miraculous, but she escaped
 To freedom and another motherhood
 Than that of poems. She was a very woman
 And needed both.

If I had gone to call,

Would Wimpole Street have been the kindlier place,
 Or Casa Guidi, in which to have met her?
 I am a little doubtful of that meeting,
 For Queen Victoria was very young and strong
 And all-pervading in her apogee
 At just that time. If we had stuck to poetry,
 Sternly refusing to be drawn off by mesmerism
 Or Roman revolutions, it might have done.
 For, after all, she is another sister,
 But always, I rather think, an older sister
 And not herself so curious a technician
 As to admit newfangled modes of writing—
 "Except, of course, in Robert, and that is neither
 Here nor there, for Robert is a genius."
 I do not like the turn this dream is taking,
 Since I am very fond of Mrs. Browning
 And very much indeed should like to hear her
 Graciously asking me to call her "Ba."
 But then the Devil of Verisimilitude
 Creeps in and forces me to know she wouldn't.

Convention again, and how it chafes my nerves,
For we are such a little family
Of singing sisters, and as if I didn't know
What those years felt like tied down to the sofa.
Confound Victoria, and the slimy inhibitions
She loosed on all us Anglo-Saxon creatures!
Suppose there hadn't been a Robert Browning,
No "Sonnets from the Portuguese" would have been written.
They are the first of all her poems to be,
One might say, fertilized. For, after all,
A poet is flesh and blood as well as brain
And Mrs. Browning, as I said before,
Was very, very woman. Well, there are two
Of us, and vastly unlike, that's for certain.
Unlike at least until we tear the veils
Away which commonly gird souls. I scarcely think
Mrs. Browning would have approved the process
In spite of what had surely been relief;
For speaking souls must always want to speak
Even when bat-eyed, narrow-minded Queens
Set prudishness to keep the keys of impulse.
Then do the frowning Gods invent new banes
And make the need of sofas. But Sappho was dead
And I, and others, not yet peeped above
The edge of possibility. So that's an end
To speculating over tea-time talks
Beyond the movement of pentameters
With Mrs. Browning.

But I go dreaming on,
In love with these my spiritual relations.
I rather think I see myself walk up
A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell
And send a card in to Miss Dickinson.
Yet that's a very silly way to do.
I should have taken the dream twist-ends about
And climbed over the fence and found her deep
Engrossed in the doings of a humming-bird
Among nasturtiums. Not having expected strangers,
She might forget to think me one, and holding up
A finger say quite casually: "Take care.
Don't frighten him, he's only just begun."
"Now this," I well believe I should have thought,
"Is even better than Sappho. With Emily
You're really here, or never anywhere at all

In range of mind." Wherefore, having begun
 In the strict centre, we could slowly progress
 To various circumferences, as we pleased.
 We could, but should we? That would quite depend
 On Emily. I think she'd be exacting,
 Without intention possibly, and ask
 A thousand tight-rope tricks of understanding.
 But, bless you, I would somersault all day
 If by so doing I might stay with her.
 I hardly think that we should mention souls
 Although they might just round the corner from us
 In some half-quizzical, half-wistful metaphor.
 I'm very sure that I should never seek
 To turn her parables to stated fact.
 Sappho would speak, I think, quite openly,
 And Mrs. Browning guard a careful silence,
 But Emily would set doors ajar and slam them
 And love you for your speed of observation.
 Strange trio of my sisters, most diverse;

And how extraordinarily unlike
 Each is to me, and which way shall I go?
 Sappho spent and gained; and Mrs. Browning,
 After a miser girlhood, cut the strings
 Which tied her money-bags and let them run;
 But Emily hoarded—hoarded—only giving
 Herself to cold, white paper. Starved and tortured,
 She cheated her despair with games of patience
 And fooled herself by winning. Frail little elf,
 The lonely brain-child of a gaunt maturity,
 She hung her womanhood upon a bough
 And played ball with the stars—too long—too long.
 The garment of herself hung on a tree
 Until at last she lost even the desire
 To take it down. Who's fault? Why let us say,
 To be consistent, Queen Victoria's.
 But really, not to over-rate the Queen,
 I feel obliged to mention Martin Luther,
 And, behind him, the long line of Church Fathers
 Who draped their prurience like a dirty cloth
 About the naked majesty of God.
 Good-bye, my sisters, all of you are great,
 And all of you are marvellously strange,
 And none of you has any word for me.

I cannot write like you, I cannot think
In terms of Pagan or of Christian now.
I only hope that possibly some day
Some other woman with an itch for writing
May turn to me as I have turned to you
And chat with me a brief few minutes. How
We lie, we poets! It is three good hours
I have been dreaming. Has it seemed so long
To you? And yet I thank you for the time
Although you leave me sad and self-distrustful,
For older sisters are very sobering things.
Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting.
No, you have not seemed strange to me, but near,
Frightfully near, and rather terrifying.
I understand you all, for in myself—
Is that presumption? Yet, indeed, it's true.
We are one family. And still my answer
Will not be any one of yours, I see.
Well, never mind that now. Good night! Good night!

AMY LOWELL.